

Nicaragua Finds C.I.A. Behind Every Mishap

By STEPHEN KINZER

THE rains were late this year, and the pro-Sandinista newspaper Nuevo Diario said it knew why. Under a banner headline Aug. 10, the paper said the drought had been created artificially by United States agents working out of a secret American base at Tiger Island in the Gulf of Fonseca, which borders Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador.

The plan was said to have succeeded in cutting agricultural production both in Nicaragua and in guerrilla-held territory in eastern El Salvador, while forcing affected families in Honduras to move out of parched areas, which the United States supposedly covets for use as clandestine bases. Two days later, the skies over Central America opened for a torrential downpour. On Aug. 13, a Nuevo Diario headline announced: "Rain all over the country; jubilation among farmers hit by drought." There was no mention of a United States plot.

The Central Intelligence Agency, a powerful symbol, both as myth and reality, is always in the

news here. The Government has accused nearly every opposition leader and organization of being tied to it.

In the latest accusation last week, Nicaraguan security agents held a news conference to present Guillermo Quant Tai, a businessman and vice president of the Chamber of Commerce, who had been held incommunicado for two weeks after being arrested on a traffic charge.

Mr. Quant confessed to providing economic information — none of it secret, he said — to American agents. He was led away after the news conference, and the Government did not say what it would do with him.

Unanswered Questions

Mr. Quant's brief public appearance raised as many questions as it answered. What had he gone through in the two weeks since his arrest? Was he an important agent or an innocent victim? Why did the police wait four days after arresting him before conducting a search of his home that, they said, turned up tools of espionage?

Some of those accused of complicity with the C.I.A. may indeed have such ties, but the charges have been repeated so often, and against such a

large number of people and institutions, that many Nicaraguans pay them little heed.

The contention that United States agents caused the drought may do more to hurt Nuevo Diario's already limited credibility than to foment indignation among Nicaraguans.

There is an often-repeated joke in Managua to the effect that the C.I.A. station chief must have the easiest job in the country. The Sandinistas make so many blunders, it goes, that he hardly has to lift a finger to make them look bad.

A Public Confession

Some Sandinista accusations have proven false. Interior Minister Tomas Borge asserted, for example, that C.I.A. agents had killed a Salvadoran guerrilla commander in Managua in 1983. It was later learned that the rebel officer had been killed by rival guerrillas.

Other allegations, however, appeared to be based on fact, such as the arrest and conviction earlier this year of two Interior Ministry officials. One confessed in public; the other was never presented to reporters and died in his jail cell June 4, reportedly a suicide.

While many of the accusations seem improbable, diplomats and neutral observers in Managua agree that United States intelligence agencies are indeed active here. Clandestine operations, they say, are roughly divided into two categories.

First, there is American support for the Nicaraguan rebels, or contras, a vast project and something of a departure from the intelligence agency's more usual cloak-and-dagger tactics.

The contra war, in which the C.I.A. plays a leading role, is run principally from the United States Embassy in Honduras. Under the former Ambassador, John D. Negroponte, the embassy became the nerve center for the anti-Sandinista battle. Mr. Negroponte's successor, John Ferch, tried to re-emphasize diplomacy, but he was abruptly dismissed three months ago and has not been replaced.

Another major anti-Sandinista effort by the C.I.A. here is the interception of communications, which is believed to be among the most effective of the agency's operations. Other activities, considerably smaller in scope but perhaps even more valuable, are widely believed to be run by agents listed as American diplomats.

Soon after the arrest of the Interior Ministry officials in March, two American diplomats they implicated — a young consular officer and a political officer said to have been the Managua station chief — left their posts.

The Sandinistas boasted that discovering the two apparent agents proved the efficiency of their counterintelligence operation, which is run by the Deputy Interior Minister, Luis Carrion Cruz, with the help of Cuban and East German advisers.

But some in Managua saw it differently.

"If the C.I.A. can have two lieutenants in the Interior Ministry on their payroll," said a South American ambassador, "I have trouble seeing that as a Sandinista victory, even if they get caught."